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LATER POEMS.

Charles G. D. Roberts.

FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION.

IN SEPTEMBER.
BEFORE THE BREATH OF STORM.
ACTAEON.
A BALLAD OF PHILOMELA.
IN THE AFTERNOON.
LOTOS.

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With

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Come

"Till

IN SEPTEMBER.

This windy, bright September afternoon
My heart is wide awake, yet full of dreams.
The air, alive with hushed confusion, teems
With scent of grain-fields, and a mystic rune
Foreboding of the fall of Summer soon
Keeps swelling and subsiding ; till there seems
O'er all the world of valleys, hills, and streams,
Only the wind's inexplicable tune.

My heart is full of dreams, yet wide awake.
I lie and watch the topmost tossing boughs
Of tall elms, pale against the vault of blue ;
But even now some yellowing branches shake,
Some hue of death the living green endows :—
If beauty flies, fain would I vanish too.
Fredericton, Sept., 1882.

BEFORE THE BREATH OF STORM.

I.

Before the breath of storm,
While yet the long, bright afternoons are warm,
Under this stainless arch of azure sky
The air is filled with gathering wings for flight ;
Yet with the shrill mirth and the loud delight
Comes the foreboding sorrow of this cry—
“ Till the storm scatter and the gloom dispel,
Farewell ! Farewell !
Farewell ! ”

190669

II.

Why will ye go so soon,
In these soft hours, this sweeter month than June?
The liquid air floats over field and tree

A veil of dreams—where do ye find the sting?
A gold enchantment lies upon the sea

And purpled hills—why have ye taken wing?—
But faint, far-heard, the answers fall and swell—

“Farewell! Farewell!

Farewell!”

Sept., 1882.

ACTAEON.

(*Duselia, a woman of Plataea, speaks.*)

I have lived long, and watched out many days,
And seen the showers fall and the light shine down
Equally on the vile and righteous head.

I have lived long, and served the gods, and drawn
Small joy and liberal sorrow,—scorned the gods,
And drawn no less my little meed of good,
Suffered my ill in no more grievous measure.

I have been glad—Alas, my foolish people!

I have been glad with you;—and ye are glad

Seeing the gods in all things, praising them

In yon their lucid heaven, this green world,

The moving inexorable sea, and wide

Delight of noonday,—till in ignorance

Ye err, your feet transgress, and the bolt falls.

Ay, have I sung, and dreamed that they would hear,

And worshipped, and made offerings ; it may be
They heard amid their peace and were well pleased,—
A little music in their ears perchance,
A grain more savour for their nostrils, sweet
Though scarce accounted of. But when for me
The mists of Acheron have striven up,
And horror was shed round me ; when my knees
Relaxed, my tongue clave speechless, they forgot.
And when my sharp cry cut the moveless night,
And days and nights my wailings clamored up
And beat about their golden homes, perchance
They shut their ears ;—no happy music this
Eddying through their nectar-cups and calm.
Then I cried out against them, and died not ;
And rose, and set me to my daily tasks ;
So all day long with bare uplift right arm
Drew out the strong thread from the carded wool,
Or wrought strange figures, lotus-buds and serpents,
In purple on the himation's saffron fold ;
Nor uttered praise with the slim-wristed girls
To any god, nor uttered any prayer,
Nor poured out bowls of wine or smooth, bright oil,
Nor brake and scattered cakes of beaten meal
And honey, as this time, or such a god,
Required ; nor offered apples summer-flushed,
Scarlet pomegranates, poppy-blooms or doves.
All this with scorn and waiting all day long,
And night long with dim fear, afraid of sleep,—
Seeing I took no hurt of all these things,
And seeing my eyes were dried of their tears
So that once more the light grew sweet for me,
Once more grew sweet the fields and valley streams,

I thought with how small profit men take heed
To worship, with bowed heads and suppliant hands
And sacrifice, the everlasting gods,
Who take small thought of men to curse or bless,
Girt with their purples of perpetual peace.
Thus blindly deemed I of them ; yet, and yet
Have late well learned their hate is swift as fire,
Be one so wretched to encounter it ;
Ay, have I seen a multitude of good deeds
Fly up in the pan like husks, like husks blown dry.
Hereafter let none question the high gods.
I questioned, but these watching eyes have seen
Actaeon, thewed and sinewed like a god,
Godlike for sweet speech and great deeds, hurled down
To hideous death,—scarce suffered space to breathe
Ere the wild heart in his changed, quivering side
Burst with mad terror, and the stag's wide eyes
Glared one sick moment mid the dogs' hot jaws.

Cithaeron, mother mount, set steadfastly
Deep in Bœotia, past the utmost roar
Of seas, beyond Corinthian waves withdrawn,
Girt with green vales awake with brooks or still,
Towers up mid lesser-browed Bœotian hills,—
These couched like herds secure beneath its ken,—
And watches earth's green corners. At mid-noon
We of Plataea mark the sun make pause
Right over it, and top its crest with pride ;
Men of Eleusis look toward north at dawn
To see the long, white fleeces upward roll
Smitten aslant with saffron, fade like smoke,
And leave the grey-green dripping glens all bare,

The drenched slopes open sunward ;—slopes wherein
What gods, what godlike men to match with gods,
Have roamed, and grown up mighty, and waxed wise
Under the law of him whom gods and men
Reverence and call Cheiron ! He made wise
With knowledge of all wisdom, had made wise
Actaeon, till none cunninger there moved
To drive with might the javelin forth, or bend
The corded ebony, save Leto's son.

But him the Centaur shall behold no more
With long stride making down the beechy glade,
Clear-eyed, with firm lips laughing, at his heels
The clamour of his fifty deep-tongued hounds,—
Him the wise Centaur shall behold no more.

I have lived long, and watched out many days,
And am well sick of watching. Three days since,
I had gone forth upon the slopes for herbs,
Snake-root, and subtle gums ; and when the light
Fell slantwise thro' the upper glens, and missed
The sunk ravines, I came where all the hills
Circle the valley of Gargaphian streams.
Reach beyond reach all down the valley gleamed,
Thick branches ringed them. Scarce a bow-shot past
My platan, thro' the woven leaves low hung,
Trembling in meshes of the woven sun,
A yellow-sanded pool, shallow and clear
Lay sparkling, brown about the further bank
Where scarlet-berried ash-trees darkened it.
But suddenly the waters brake awake
With laughter and light voices, and I saw
Where Artemis, white goddess incorrupt,

Bane of swift beasts and deadly for straight shaft
Unswerving, from a coppice not far off
Came to the pool from the hither bank to bathe.
Amid her maiden company she moved,
Their cross-thonged yellow buskins scattered off,
Unloosed their knotted hair; and thus the pool
Received them stepping shrinking down to it.

Here they flocked white, and splashed the water drops
On rounded breast and shoulder snowier
Than high light clouds that bar the morning's blue,—
Fresher than river-grasses which the herds
Pluck from the river in the burning noons.
Their tresses on the summer wind they flung,
And some a shining yellow fleece let fall
For the sun's envy,— others with white hands
Lifted a glooming wealth of locks more dark
Than deepest wells, but purple in the sun.
But she, their mistress, of the heart unstormed,
Stood taller than them all, supreme, and still,
Perfectly fair like day, and crowned with hair
The colour of nipt beech-leaves: — Ah, such hair
Was mine in years when I was such as these.
I let it fall to cover me, or coiled
Its soft thick coils about my throat and arm,
Its colour like nipt beech-leaves, tawny brown,
But in the sun a fountain of live gold.
Of these grey locks I dreamed not, but for men
Knowledge of ill is swift, and soon at hand.—
The while from hollowed palm and cool the stream
Luxuriously fell lingering down her limbs,
And sparkled o'er the snowiness unflushed,

Even as thus they played, while some lithe maids
Upreached fair arms to grasp the berried ash,
And plucking the bright bunches showered them wide
By red ripe handfuls, not far off I saw
With long stride making down the beechy glade,
Clear-eyed, with firm lips laughing, at his heels
The clamour of his fifty deep-tongued hounds,
Actaeon. I beheld him not far off,
But unto bath and bathers hid from view,
Being beyond that mighty rock whereon
His wont was to lie stretched at dip of eve,
When frogs are loud amid the tall plumed reeds
In marshy lands along Asopus' bank,
Deeming his life was very sweet, his day
A pleasant one, the peopled breadths of earth
Most fair, and fair the shining tracts of sea —
Green solitudes, and broad low-lying plains
Made brown with frequent labour of men's hands,
And salt blue fruitless waters. But this Mount,
Cithaeron, bosomed deep in soundless hills —
Its fountained vales, its nights of starry calm,
Its high chill dawns, its long-drawn golden days,—
Was dearest to him. Here he dreamed high dreams,
And felt within his sinews strength to strive
Where strife was sorest and to overcome,
And in his heart the thought to do great deeds,
With power in all ways to accomplish them.
For had not he done well to men, and done
Well to the gods! Therefore he stood secure.

But him — for him — Ah that these eyes should see! —
Approached a sudden stumbling in his ways.

Not yet, not yet he knew a God's fierce wrath,
Nor wist of that swift vengeance lying in wait.

And now he came upon a slope of sward
Against the pool. With startled cry the maids
Shrank clamoring round their mistress, or made flight
To covert in the hazel thickets. She
Stirred not, but pitiless anger paled her eyes,
Intent with deadly purpose. He, amazed,
Stood with his head thrust forward, while his curls
Sun-lit lay glorious on his mighty neck,
Let fall his bow and clanging spear, and gazed
Dilate with ecstasy,—nor marked the dogs
Hush their deep tongues, draw close, and ring him round,
And fix upon him strange, red, hungry eyes,
And crouch to spring. This for a moment; then
It seemed his strong knees faltered, and he sank.
Then I cried out, for straight a shuddering stag
Sprang one wild leap over the dogs — but they
Fastened upon his flanks with a long yell,
And reached his throat; and that proud head went down
Beneath their wet red fangs and reeking jaws.

I have lived long and watched out many days,
Yet have not seen that aught is sweet save life,
Nor learned that life hath other end than death.
Thick horror like a cloud had veiled my sight,
That for a space I saw not; and my ears
Were shut from hearing; but when sense grew clear
Once more, I only saw the vacant pool
Unrippled, only saw the dreadful sward
Where dogs lay gorged, or moved in fretful search

Questing uneasily ; — and some far up
The slope, and some at the low water's edge,
With snouts set high in air and swelling throats,
Uttered keen howls that smote the sundered hills.
They missed their master's form, nor understood
Where was the voice they loved, the hand that reared :
And some lay watching by the spear and bow
Flung down.

And now upon the homeless pack
And paling stream arose a fitful wind
Out of the yellow west awhile, and moved
The branches down the valley ; then blew off
To eastward toward the long grey straits, and died
Into the dark, beyond the utmost verge.

Fredericton, March. 1882.

A BALLAD OF PHILOMELA.

From gab of jay and chatter of crake
The dusk wood covered me utterly :
And here the tongue of the thrush was awake ;
Flame-lances out of the low bright sky
Lighted the gloom with gold-brown dye
Before dark, and manifold chorusing
Arose of thrushes remote and nigh,
For the tongue of the singer needs must sing.

Midmost a close green covert of brake
A brown bird listening silently
Sat, and I thought — she mourns for the sake
Of Itylus, for the stains that lie

In her heritage of sad memory.—
 But the thrushes were hushed at evening,
 And I waited to hear the brown bird try,
 For the tongue of the singer needs must sing.
 And I said — “ The thought of the thrushes will shake
 With rapture remembered her heart, and her shy
 Tongue of the sore times dead will take
 To make her a living song, when sigh
 The noiseless winds disburthened by :
 Hark now ! ” — for the upraised quivering wing,
 The throat exultant I could descry —
 For the tongue of the singer needs must sing.

L'ENVOI.

But the bird dropped dead with only a cry.
 I found its tongue was withered, poor thing !
 Then I no whit wondered, for well knew I
 The heart of the singer will break or sing.
 Chatham, April, 1881.

IN THE AFTERNOON.

Wind of the summer afternoon,
 Hush, for my heart is out of tune !
 Hush, for thou movest restlessly
 The too light sleeper, Memory !
 Whate'er thou hast to tell me, yet
 T'were something sweeter to forget ; —
 Sweeter than all thy breath of balm
 An hour of unremembering calm !

Blowing over the roofs, and down
The bright streets of this inland town,
These busy crowds, these rocking trees,—
What strange note hast thou caught from these?
A note of waves and rushing tides,
Where past the dykes the red flood glides,
To brim the shining channels far
Up the green plains of Tantramar.
Once more I snuff the salt, I stand
On the long dykes of Westmoreland;
I watch the narrowing flats, the strip
Of red clay at the water's lip;
Far off the net-reels brown and high,
And boat-masts slim against the sky;
Along the ridges of the dykes
Wind-beaten scant sea-grass, and spikes
Of last year's mullein; down the slopes
To landward, in the sun, thick ropes
Of blue vetch and convolvulus
And matted roses glorious.
The liberal blooms o'erbrim my hands;
I walk the level, wide marsh-lands;
Waist-deep in dusty-blossomed grass
I watch the swooping breezes pass
In sudden long pale lines, that flee
Up the deep breast of this green sea.

I listen to the bird that stirs
The purple tops, and grasshoppers
Whose summer din, before my feet
Subsiding, wakes on my retreat.
Again the droning bees hum by ;
Still-winged the gray hawk wheels on high ;
I drink again the wild perfumes,
And roll, and crush the grassy blooms.
Blown back to olden days, I fain
Would quaff the olden joys again ;
But all the olden sweetness not
The old unmindful peace hath brought.
—Wind of this summer afternoon
Thou hast re-called my childhood's June ;
My heart, still is it satisfied
By all that golden summer-tide ?
Hast thou one eager yearning filled,
Or any restless throbbing stilled,
Or hast thou any power to bear
Even a little of my care ?—
Ever so little of this weight
Of weariness can'st thou abate ?—
Ah, poor thy gift indeed, unless
Thou bring the old child-heartedness ;
And such a gift to bring is given,
Alas, to no wind under heaven !

Wind of the summer afternoon
Be still ; my heart is not in tune ;
Sweet is thy voice — but yet, but yet
Of all t'were sweetest — to forget.

1882.

LOTOS.

I

Wherefore awake so long,
Wide-eyed, laden with care ?
Not all battle is life,
But a little respite and peace
May fold us round as a fleece
Soft-woven for all men's wear,
Sleep then, mindless of strife ;
Slumber, dreamless of wrong :—
Hearken my slumber-song,
Falling asleep.

II

Drowsily all noon long
The warm winds rustle the grass
Hush'dly, lulling thy brain,
Burthened with murmurs of bees,
And numberless odours, and ease ;
Dream-clouds gather and pass
Of painless remembrance of pain ;
Havened from rumour of wrong
Dreams are thy slumber-song,
Fallen to sleep.

Fredericton, August, 1881.